Title:
Murder, Myth, and Melodrama: The Theatrical Histories of Jack the Ripper

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Abstract (summary):
In 1888, several murders in the London boroughs of Whitechapel and Spitalfields became the first modern serial killings reported by mass-circulation daily media. These were identified with “Jack the Ripper,” a name that still resonates in popular culture and entertainment. This dissertation looks to the theatrical culture of London, arguing that theatre and drama provided models for the creation of this figure, which has the cultural status of a “myth” in the sense defined by Roland Barthes. Drawing on the vocabulary of Barthes and on Diana Taylor’s idea of the “scenario” as a unit of enacted narrative with mythic cultural force, four case studies from a variety of London stages trace how ideas and anxieties about urban modernity were taken from the stage and used by newspaper writers and the public to imagine the Ripper. The first looks at a production of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde that took place at the same time as the murders, showing how these modeled the killer for a middle-class audience. The second describes an illegal basement theatre in the East End that used representations of the murdered women as one of its variety of entertainments, arguing that these both resisted and confirmed definitions of the murders, the victims, and Whitechapel itself as “obscene.” A third case looks at London Day By Day, a successful 1889 melodrama, arguing that this was the first representation of the Ripper on a legitimate stage, albeit in a conflicted and partially-obscured way that nevertheless reveals how crucial melodrama and its iconography was to popular understandings of the murders in the first place. The final case study looks at The Lodger, a 1914 novel that was adapted to stage and screen, tracing how urban legends about a possible killer functioned to consolidate the image of the murders in the 20th century. In conclusion the contemporary practice of “Jack the Ripper Walking Tours” is briefly surveyed to argue that contests over visuality, poverty, obscenity, and urban space that had important currency in the late-Victorian theatre are an integral part of the Ripper myth and remain relevant to this day.

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Jack the Ripper, undoubtedly the most famous serial killer in the world, spread terror throughout London in the last years of the 19th century. Since then his crimes have been pored over by untold numbers of experts - yet nobody has ever convincingly unmasked this notorious figure. Instead conspiracy theories, myths and fantastical speculation have concealed the chilling facts of the case. So did 'Jack the Ripper' really exist? Or is he a media invention? Most experts agree that one man was behind at least four killings. Others think there were possibly eight. A Metropolitan Police i Considered to be Jack the Ripper's Swan Song, Mary Jane Kelly's murder was the most gruesome of all the Whitechapel Murders. She was found horribly mutilated, lying on the bed in her single room flat where she lived at 13 Miller's Court, off Dorset Street, Spitalfields. She was discovered at 10:45am on the morning of Friday, November 9, 1888. Writers have also disputed McKenzie as being a victim of Jack the Ripper, but rather of a murderer trying to copy his modus operandi in an attempt to deflect suspicion. The tenth Whitechapel murder victim was “The Pinchin Street Torso”. The victim was named as such because she was found headless and legless under a railway arch on Pinchin Street, Whitechapel, on September 10, 1889. Through these stories of murder—from the brutal to the pathetic—Flanders builds a rich and multi-faceted portrait of Victorian society in Great Britain. With an irresistible cast of swindlers, forgers, and poisoners, the mad, the bad and the utterly dangerous, The Invention of Murder is both a mesmerizing tale of crime and punishment, and history at its most readable. ...

Kindle Store. The Invention of Murder is not without its minor pleasures. Some of the related stories are suitably what-the-fork that they can’t help but entertain in the morbid way that the best true crime stories do. It covers everything you’d expect, from Burke and Hare to Jack the Ripper.